

Strata

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Introduction

Strata: Geology, Archaeology and Psychology in Victorian and Edwardian Literature

Eleanor Dobson and Gemma Banks, University of Birmingham

In May 2015 we held a conference entitled ‘Strata’ at the University of Birmingham, seeking to explore how the cultural and ideological concerns of geology, archaeology and psychology were embedded within the fiction and non-fiction of the Victorian and Edwardian eras. Developing from the papers presented at this conference, this special issue constitutes the first academic study on the theme of ‘strata’ in this period of Anglophone literature that takes all three of these disciplines into consideration. These historical epochs encompass rapid developments in the fields of geology, archaeology and psychology: it was a period that saw landmarks in archaeological discovery, including the ancient city of Troy in 1868, Mycenae in 1876 and Knossos in 1878; scientists such as Bertram Boltwood revolutionised geology through radiometric dating; and pioneers – most notably Sigmund Freud – developed ground-breaking techniques to penetrate the unconscious. The boundaries separating these burgeoning disciplines, and especially their influences in literature, were far from distinct, as the physical strata of archaeology and geology were often likened to the unconscious mind, and *vice versa*. Resultantly, the period produced literature that dealt with all manners of depths: these strata – both literal and figurative – were explored, their treasures exposed, and their secrets made to impact upon the ways in which both the external world and the internal self were perceived.

Recent scholarly interest in these subjects is evidenced by publications such as Adelene Buckland’s *Novel Science: Fiction and the Invention of Nineteenth-Century Geology* (2013), Virginia Zimmerman’s *Excavating Victorians* (2008), Rick Rylance’s *Victorian Psychology and British Culture 1850-1880* (2000), and Susanne Duesterberg’s *Popular Receptions of Archaeology: Fictional and Factual Texts in*

19th and Early 20th Century Britain (2015). These scholarly works provide a rich backdrop of twenty-first-century literary criticism upon which the articles in this special issue build. This collection seeks to expand the scope of the above publications by recognising the intimate interrelatedness of archaeology, geology and psychology, bringing these fields into a fruitful triple-helix. Thus this volume strives to break new critical ground by drawing out the nuances and interplays between these disciplines and processes as they are represented in literature of the period, showcasing the full range of excavation of both physical and psychological depths.

In the first of these essays, Rachel Fountain Eames proposes a new reading of Charles Kingsley's novel *The Water-Babies* through the lens of geology. Situating the text firmly within the culture of contemporary scientific debate, she excavates its geological subtexts, not only identifying the novel as a satirical response to the challenges of 'Golden Age' geological thought, but also Kingsley's use of stratigraphic forms as a frame for moral instruction. Noting the influence of contemporary geologists including Charles Lyell upon Kingsley's work, she identifies the novel's place in a Christian katabatic tradition that can be traced back to Dante's *Divine Comedy* (1555), an antecedent also based around moral (and geologically layered) schemata.

Lyell's geological principles are also addressed in Anna Burton's essay, which unites these axioms with those of Gideon Mantell, as well as William Gilpin's eighteenth-century notion of the 'Picturesque'. Burton argues that Thomas Hardy's novel *The Woodlanders* engages with the seemingly disparate ideologies across these fields; her article explores the significance of spatial and temporal strata, problematizing the divisions between physical landscape and personal or historical forms of memory. Authors, characters and readers are all shown to engage in processes of reading layered traces within spatial, temporal and textual landscapes, as Burton's analysis reveals new layers of meaning in a variety of canonical sources.

Molly Ryder's essay further builds upon notion of spatial strata. In her study of George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, Ryder demonstrates how the figuring of the mind in material terms facilitates Eliot's particular style of psychological realism by uniting an inward-gazing psychological interest with the outwardly observable physical — in this case specifically architectural and archaeological — structures hailed in

conventional realism. Ryder explores how Eliot describes the dynamic mind of her heroine, Dorothea Brooke, in these terms, and how Brooke in turn conceives of her fellow characters in this way, demonstrating the various levels at which mental architecture operates within the novel.

Focusing on the writings of Oscar Wilde and Vernon Lee, Angie Blumberg also uncovers the employment of an archaeological aesthetic in order to suggest the non-normative desires hidden within the self. Her essay demonstrates how these writers in particular 'queered' archaeology; predating and anticipating Freud's comparisons between the archaeological and the psychoanalytic method later in the twentieth century, these textual examples can be seen to employ the buried archaeological past in order to represent fluid sexuality, non-normative history and alternate realities.

Further drawing upon the parallels between archaeological and psychoanalytic theory, Maria Fleischhack's essay addresses the psychological bond that modern Western characters often share with ancient Egyptians in fiction by Bram Stoker, Guy Boothby, and H. Rider Haggard. Whether physical (and psychical) *doppelgängers* of ancient Egyptians, susceptible to trance states in which they and the ancients are brought into psychological alignment, or themselves reincarnations of the ancient dead, modern Western characters embody the entwinement of psychology and archaeology in the period. These Egyptian-themed stories are shown to deconstruct stereotypical representations of the supposedly superior *self* and the inferior *other* by establishing (meta)fictional historical connections between modern British and ancient Egyptian individuals, and, in doing so, tackle particularly modern concerns: gender inequality, imperial arrogance and archaeological entitlement.

The essays in this issue have been carefully selected to showcase original, innovative research which, when considered independently and as a whole, contributes to burgeoning critical fields including literature and science by revealing the breadth of literary engagement with the theme of 'strata': from canonical Victorian authors such as Eliot and Hardy through to those associated with the *fin de siècle*, including Wilde and Stoker. Scrutinising this range of eminent authors writing across the period illuminates a number of stimulating trends within myriad texts that all involve digging down through physical and psychical layers, offering fresh and exciting approaches to the late Victorian and Edwardian canon. Most notably, they suggest

reconsiderations of sexuality, memory, and notions of selfhood, and establish an intimacy between antiquity and modernity that reveals a very firm (and imperialistic) sense of Victorian entitlement to the past. From the secrets of the unconscious through to the treasures of the ancient past, the essays that comprise this special issue seek to chart and interpret the cultural ripples that radiate outwards when these fragments come to light.

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